DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 404 657 CS 215 751

AUTHOR Cooper, David D.
TITLE Classroom to Community--and Back: Michigan State's Service-Learning Writing Project.
REPORT NO ISSN-0897-263X
PUB DATE Apr 97
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Composition Chronicle: Newsletter for Writing Teachers; v10 n3 p6-8 Apr 1997

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Citizenship; *Citizenship Responsibility; Civics; Critical Thinking; Democratic Values; Higher Education; *School Community Programs; *Service Learning; Social Values; Student Participation; Writing Assignments; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Michigan State University; *Public Discourse; Writing Topics

ABSTRACT

Like most Americans, young people today yearn to play more active roles in community life. According to a recent study, there are two roadblocks to effective citizen empowerment: lack of knowledge and training that could help people connect with each other, and a dimmed belief that individuals can make a difference. In an effort to address these limitations, writing faculty affiliated with the Service Learning Writing Project (SLWP) at Michigan State University, along with colleagues nationwide, have developed a curriculum that treats democracy itself as the art of public discourse. Inaugurated in 1993, the SLWP first set out to strengthen links between undergraduate learning, writing instruction, and public service. The program currently places more than 200 writing students a year into more than 50 nonprofit agencies where students work collaboratively on writing assignments that have a direct and immediate impact on the lives of people in Michigan. Whether in already existing writing classes or the SLWP's own special course, faculty who use community service writing assignments try to focus on problems of public life relevant to course content and theme. Students read representative works by those who have shaped the communitarian conscience of American civic culture--Jefferson, Jane Addams, Martin Luther King, John Dewey, Dorothy Day, etc. Writing assignments based on such readings supplemented by community service agency writing projects demand the same high level of critical awareness and sophistication for student writers that democracy has always asked of its citizens. (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 404 657

Classroom To Community—And Back: Michigan State's Service-Learning Writing Project

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

B. McCleary

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

David D. Cooper

"When you believe in a democratic society, you provide a setting for education that is democratic." —Myles Horton

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Like most Americans, young people today yearn to play more active roles in community life. According to a recent Kettering Foundation survey, however, there are two roadblocks to effective citizen empowerment: lack of knowledge and training that could help connect people with each other and to the powers that shape their lives, and a dimmed belief that they can make a difference. While it is true, then, that the public's desire to get involved in democratic decision-making has never been greater, actual public participation in civic culture is in decline.

In an effort to better understand that decline and address constructive ways to reverse it, writing faculty affiliated with the Service-Learning Writing Project (SLWP) at Michigan State University, along with our many colleagues nationwide who are experimenting with community-responsive writing initiatives, have developed a curriculum that treats democracy itself as the art of public discourse. Inaugurated in 1993 with grants from the Michigan Campus Compact, the SLWP is housed in the Department of American Thought and Language, a teaching and research unit primarily responsible for first-year writing instruction for MSU's more than 6,000 freshmen. With support from the College of Arts and Letters, the Writing Center, and the Service-Learning Center (part of Student Services), the SLWP first set out to strengthen links between undergraduate learning, writing instruction, and public service. We did this by providing interested faculty teaching a variety of content-based general education writing courses with resources and advice to set up writing-intensive community service placements in pre-existing American Thought and Language courses. In addition to sponsoring placements in writing courses focusing on such topics as Women in America and Science and Technology in American Life, the SLWP established its own "home" course—"Public Life in America"—which is listed separately in the course catalog and identified as requiring a commitment to public service. Many students who sign up for the course have previous volunteer experience. Others may be looking for a way to test the waters of certain career possibilities. Some like the idea of adding a publication or professional work experience to their résumés. The Service-Learning Writing Project currently places more than 200 writing students a year into more than fifty Lansing-area non-profit agencies where students work collaboratively on writing assignments that have a direct and immediate impact on the lives of people in mid-Michigan.

Whether in already-existing writing classes or the SLWP's own special course, faculty who use community service writing assignments try to focus on problems of public life in America relevant to a particular course's content and theme. We pay particular attention to the democratic model as it bears on important civic issues, and we focus our writing pedagogy on the fruitful connection between democratic processes and rhetorical practices. The democratic model, we believe, is essentially a rhetorical one: the articulation and dissemination of information, open and understandable to all, invites civil debate of important issues that, in turn, leads to credible decision-making by elected officials. Responsible public discourse is the talk of democracy. It is the syntax of those social and political ligaments that Tocqueville wrote about when commenting on Americans' knack for connecting our individual problems and private concerns with the broader issues of public life.

We have found, in fact, that democratic processes and rhetorical practices naturally converge in the writing classroom. Writing assignments based on readings about American public culture supplemented by community service agency writing projects demand the same high level of critical awareness and sophistication for student writers that democracies have always asked of their citizens. As a rhetoric, democratic processes bring into sharp relief the importance of analytic methods that are the stock and trade of any language arts classroom—the same methods that citizens living in an information age need to disentangle opinion-making from public relations, the relevant from the trivial, truth from propaganda.

Students need these skills whether they are tracking through the state legislature a bill proposing cuts in adult education literacy services or adapting tenant information pamphlets to new laws governing tenant/landlord relations or researching and writing a history of a local domestic violence shelter or reporting on a lively public hearing about proposed amendments to a municipal civil rights ordinance. students who take on such agency writing projects are invited into dialogue and deliberation strategies for articulating and working through differences and hammering out justice. Rather than receding into the background, civic values help us aspire to and maintain the public good. Thus they become central to our students' explorations of diversity, commitments to equity, and respect for the challenges and difficulties of resolving conflicts within a neighborhood, a community, or a nation. This service-learning component invites our students to take a leap of faith: from

AS 215751

intellectual reflection over public life in America to an experiential immersion in it. We are finding that only through that journey does the vocabulary of democracy truly come alive for our students. They discover what freedom, responsibility, and participation are all about. Students come to understand how important information, deliberation, and compromise are to the work of seeking common ground. Students watch groups apply leverage, seize opportunities, and negotiate consensus in an effort to build their communities and find hard-won answers to grass roots problems.

Furthermore, through community-based writing projects growing out of public service agency placements, students have extensive opportunities to practice public discourse and to engage in constructive conversations over American pluralism, public life, and the common good. Those conversations include often contested and sometimes uncongenial spaces in the public sphere—AIDS awareness, drug abuse prevention, alcoholism, homelessness, teen pregnancy, domestic violence—and thereby promise to forge meaningful and lasting affirmations of civic reciprocity and ethical obligation for our students.

Service-Learning Writing Project faculty treat the writing classroom, in short, as a rhetorical and civic venue, a place where moral sensibility, critical literacy, and the arts of public discourse, leavened by reflective learning, develop hand in hand. Research in language development and composition studies shows, in fact, that language proficiency, critical thinking and reading skills, moral reasoning, and historical and civic literacy develop symbiotically. Since linguistic dexterity and virtuosity are now understood to be closely associated not only with cognitive development but with refinements in moral and ethical development as well, rhetorical strategies made available to our students through carefully selected service-learning assignments support effective writing pedagogy and are ideal exercises for advancing higher order academic discourse skills.

While particular readings and assignments vary widely among faculty, all of our students, prior to their agency placements, examine primary historical source materials, documents, and literary expressions that, taken together as a core of rigorous interdisciplinary readings, constitute the historical conversation over some aspect of public culture in America. They read representative works by those voices who have shaped the communitarian conscience of American civic culture—Jefferson, Jane Addams, Martin Luther King, Jr., John Dewey, Dorothy Day, among others. And students wrestle with topics that continue to energize debates over democratic values in America: civil rights versus civic responsibilities, the tyranny of the majority, and challenges to democratic citizenship such as chronic prejudice, persistent inequality, cynicism, and mass media distortion.

Our courses invite students to debate, discuss, and critically evaluate a uniquely American value system of civic commitment that is both uniform and mosaic, reflecting a multiplicity of cultural expressions and practices unmatched by any contemporary society, yet mediated by democratic principles and values ideals embodied in American social and political institutions and the diverse traditions that sustain them. What does it mean, for example, to be a member of the communities in which we live and work—school and classroom, workplace, place of worship, neighborhood or nation? What does it mean to be a citizen in a democracy? How well do traditions of American citizenship serve the complex demands and increased diversity of civic life in America? What is the relationship between civil rights and civic responsibilities? What are the major challenges to democratic citizenship today? How well are the media—magazines, newspapers, TV, the Internet and World Wide Web—delivering information vital to effective citizen empowerment? What does "service" mean and what does it have to do with democratic citizenship?

Our courses also analyze the heritages and diverse "languages" that inform, complicate, and criticize the values of public commitment. Project faculty invite students to explore issues about values in their own lives and assess the relevance of those issues to American life generally, past, present, and future. Case studies of student-oriented groups dedicated to public service, we have found, are particularly valuable assets for discussion, research, and reflection. Cases involve nationally known organizations like The Peace Corps, City Year, Teach for America, and AmeriCorps in addition to home-grown service groups organized and staffed by students on our own campus, including, this semester for example, Urban Options and the Other Drug Education Program.

Above all, we get our students to reflect critically on America's civic traditions in preparation for their own service-learning experiences. How, for example, have civic, religious, economic, and social traditions shaped moral life in America? In what ways do those values and traditions help to ease, or perhaps even aggravate, the persistent tensions in American life between self-interest and civic duty, individualism and commitment to the common good, entitlements and responsibilities, individual rights and the social contract? What do Americans today value? How do current debates over values and disputes over civil liberties—on subjects such as abortion, Affirmative Action, hate speech codes, gays and lesbians in the military, Beavis and Butthead bashing, the Contract with America, the militia movement—reflect long-standing assumptions about how to order social life in America? How are today's communitarian values reflected, or indeed refracted, in the popular media, our educational standards, our role models, our rituals of self-governance, our vocational aspirations, and our tolerance for the growing diversity of American life?

Once students have entered these cultural conversations about civic duty, pluralism, and the moral claims of democratic citizenship, they are ready to pursue—either individually or, preferably, in teams—a major writing project connected to a field placement in a public service agency arranged through The Service-Learning Center at Michigan State, a long-established and nationally-recognized division of Student Affairs. Supported by composition faculty and advanced undergraduate writing tutors assigned to The Writing Center, students write a wide variety of documents: from news releases, PSAs, funding proposals and brochures, to editorials and letters to legislators and constituency groups. Students collect and research data. They survey constituencies. They write internal reports. Some of our student writers summarize highly specialized information supplied by an agency and write it up for general audiences. One of our student teams this semester, for example, is researching, writing, and laying out an inaugural newsletter for Women Associated With Prisoners, Inc., a new non-profit organi-

zation in our community that provides services to female members, friends, and children of the incarcerated. Another group is researching, drafting, and designing a funding report and program descriptions for Harvest House, a metro-Lansing non-profit that offers services to local families who have slipped through the traditional social-welfare safety net.

As faculty involved in our community, we try to design justice-seeking assignments and community placements for our students that, whenever possible, bring democracy to bear on local groups for whom democracy has not worked well. We seek to immerse our students in the pursuits—sometimes successful, often frustrating, seldom triumphal—of equal opportunity and social justice sought by sectors of American civic culture traditionally under-enfranchised: the mentally impaired elderly, for example, or economically dislocated single mothers and their children.

Faculty who teach project-sponsored courses are well aware of the ways political power is unevenly dispersed among social groups. In light of new postcolonial scholarship, we also understand that history can be manipulated to enforce a phony pluralism that is coercive, not empowering. Far from being the problem, however, we believe that a vibrant, strong, viable civic culture—a political community where consensus on the legitimacy of democratic institutions fosters widespread tolerance for a plurality of interests, thorough-going commitment to their reconcilability, and a widely distributed faith in political competence and mutual trust among citizens—is the best way to check the impulse to excess and inequity in our social and political arrangements.

At the same time, we try to gently encourage our humanities colleagues not to neglect the social primacy of the theoretical work currently dominating the academic scene. There is a real difference between radical theories of social transformation and cultural politics currently much in fashion in today's critical marketplace and the gritty spade work of democratic activism. A neglect of application and inattention to praxis—the bulwarks of ethical pedagogy and democratic change—even prompts Richard Rorty to complain about the arid material cranked out by an unselfcritical theory industry out of touch with human needs and interests. He is especially hard on those who practice cultural studies and, girded by theories of cultural production and social construction, lay claim to the political utility and efficacy of their teaching without ever working up calluses or entering into the partial, diminished lives of America's discouraged underclass. The difference between theorizing cultural politics and engaging in democratic work, as Rorty sees it in a recent opinion piece (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9 February 1996), is the difference between academics who attempt "to take refuge in self-protective knowingness about the present and people who still hope for a glorious future."

The struggle against intolerance, oppression, inequality, injustice, and exploitation will not be won at conference podiums in academic journals or, indeed, through the spiritually empty traces of theory. Instead, democratic reform, economic and social justice, and civic engagement have to do with ethical renewal and commitment. They require of faculty the same risks those faculty in the service-learning movement ask of our students: the risks of community involvement undertaken without expectation of personal aggrandizement or reward. The risks that accompany hope.

Want to Learn More About . . . .

The Service-Learning Writing Project? Contact the Writing Center at Michigan State University and request a free copy of *Writing in the Public Interest: Service-Learning in the Writing Classroom*, edited by Laura Julier and SLWP founder David D. Cooper. This 85-page curriculum development guide includes a student resource packet, sample syllabuses, a portfolio of student writing projects, and a comprehensive bibliography. The Writing Center, 300 Bessey Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824-1033.

Service-Learning and Composition? Check out the just-published *Composition, Community, and the Academy: Theory and Practice*, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner, Robert Crooks, and Ann Watters (Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education/NCTE, 1997). The first of the AAHE's *Series on Service-Learning in the Disciplines*, this monograph covers a range of successful program applications and theoretical frameworks for community service writing.

Other Faculty Involved in Service-Learning? Join the Invisible College, a national network of educators from two- and-four-year colleges and universities that fosters and promotes service-learning as an effective and responsible educational tool across the disciplines. Invisible College members belong to learning circles, participate in on-going email discussions, publish collaboratively, and come together in annual National Gatherings. For membership information, contact Alan Zieber, The Invisible College, Portland State University, 635 SW Harrison, Portland, OR 97207, or e-mail the Invisible College Center Coordinator at ic@sba.pdx.edu.

David D. Cooper is Associate Professor of American Thought and Language and the American Studies Program at Michigan State University. He has published widely on service-learning and public culture studies. He facilitates the Invisible College's Learning Circle on Pedagogy.